

Autry, Fregosi End 19-Year Angel Jinx

By Martin Felsenfeld

For 18-plus seasons, Gene Autry said, "The most memorable Angel game I had ever seen as an owner was in April of 1961, when our ball club defeated the Baltimore Orioles by a score of 7-2."

Now, 18 years, three general managers, seven field managers and more than 350 players later, he can say that his most memorable game is September 25, 1979. When the California Angels defeated the Kansas City Royals by a score of 4-1, it ended 19 years of a long jinx that nearly dates back to the first pitch in 1961. The record for 1979 was a best-ever 88-74.

For Angel Manager Jim Fregosi, the former shortstop who played on that 1961 team, he said, "This is great! I've met Mr. Autry almost 20 years ago and I was wondering if I would ever be seeing a first-place team of my own! Of course we came close a couple of times but now I'll remember 1979 as the year I led the Angels to their first division title."

It didn't really matter that the Angels were eliminated in four games by the Baltimore Orioles, because from the day the team acquired Rod Carew from Minnesota, fans kept pouring into Anaheim Stadium at a record pace. 2,523,575 fans showed up to chant "Yes, We Can!"

But even teams who win division titles have to have a letdown sometime. For instance, the Angels dropped their first two games of the season to the Seattle Mariners. And Fregosi, who started his first full year as manager, had to get by with 47 injuries while using 81 different lineups.

However, they rebounded to win 12 of their next 13 games, including a 10-game winning streak, to move into first place.

In July, the Angels faced the New York Yankees at Anaheim Stadium for a three-game series, and the Yankees needed a sweep to stay in the Eastern Division race. But in the first game, Nolan Ryan missed a fifth-no-hitter by two outs (Reggie Jackson got the Yankees' only hit) in a 6-1 California victory. The Angels won the second game, 8-7 in 12 innings, after Don Baylor hit a three-run homer that touched the foul pole in the ninth inning. Game Three saw Bobby Grich become the hero of the day as he socked a thrilling ninth-inning homer in a 5-4 win, giving the Angels an incredible three-game sweep over George Steinbrenner's Yankees, who in August tragically lost catcher Thurman Munson in a plane accident.

As for Baylor himself, it was a season to remember. History was made when, at the end of the 1979 season, he was the first Angel--and first former free agent--to win the American League's Most Valuable Player award. Baylor, who played in every game, hit .296 with 36 homers and a club-record 139 runs batted in. He also had 186 hits to finish second behind Carney Lansford, who had 188.

Lansford, as a second-year player, had an outstanding season himself with a .287 average, 19 homers and 79 RBI's. At third base, Lansford committed a grand total of seven errors and turned in 27 double plays.

Grich, in addition to his thriller against the Yankees, had his best season ever--.294 batting average, 30 homers, 101 RBI's.

So Did Dan Ford, the outfielder who came to the Angels in a trade with Minnesota and was billed to be a perfect replacement for the late Lyman Bostock, killed in a gunshot incident in September of 1978. Ford, nicknamed "Disco Dan," did a dance craze himself at the plate. He hit

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.290 with 21 homers and 101 RBI's, and made some unbelievable plays in the outfield.

Catcher Brian Downing hit .326 with 12 homers and 75 RBI's, all three totals being his best, and he led all right-handed A. L. hitters in batting.

Two other players who had great seasons but were also hurt, were Willie Aikens and Rod Carew. Aikens hit .280 with 21 homers and 81 RBI's, but in September, a knee injury caused him to miss the first playoff series ever registered by the Angels. Carew, who joined the Angels two months prior to their first game, hit .318 in 110 games, but lost a bid to win his eighth batting title when Boston's Fred Lynn took the crown away from him by 15 points. In June, a thumb injury sidelined him for seven weeks.

A club record 866 runs were scored by the Angels, who hit 232 as a team, also a club record, and they hit 164 homers, the most by any Angel team since 1961, when they hit 189.

But they managed to win a pennant for the first time in club history without a great deal of pitching. An earned-run average of 4.34 was good but for ninth place in the league. Major cause of this ERA total, the team's highest ever, was Dave La Roche. La Roche, who set a team record with 25 saves in 1978, had only 10 in 1979, and also had a 7-11 record and a 5.57 ERA, almost doubling his '78 total.

Chris Knapp was also ineffective on the mound and finished 5-5 with an ERA of 5.57. He missed the last portion of the season with a back injury.

Youngsters Ralph Botting, Mark Clear, Steve Eddy, Bob Ferris, John Montague and Dave Schuler joined the Angels at one time or another in 1979. But only Clear and Montague pitched consistently. Clear, the nephew of Angels' coach Bob Clear, was 11-5, with 14 saves and a 3.63 ERA. Clear was named The Sporting News' 1979 A. L. Rookie Pitcher of the Year after the season.

Montague, acquired from the Seattle Mariners in late August, was 2-0 and picked up six saves.

Ryan and Dave Frost shared the club lead in wins with 16 apiece, and they were two of Fregosi's only three starters who managed to keep their ERA's below 4.00 (Ryan's ERA was 3.60, Frost's 3.57). The third starter, Frank Tanana, who missed three months with an arm injury, was 7-5 with an ERA of 3.89.

The Angels beat the Royals six times in September to determine the pennant winner, and in their first four meetings, each team won two games apiece in Kansas City. But two weeks later in Anaheim, the Angels won the first two games of the series, and the second win gave them that long-awaited division title that eluded them 18 times before.

In the Championship Series against the Orioles, Baltimore took the first two games by scores of 6-3 and 9-8. They would have won the third game, but the Angels won the adventurous contest, 4-3, when Larry Harlow, an ex-Oriole, drove Downing home for the winning run.

The Orioles, however, won the A. L. pennant the next day when Scott McGregor pitched a six-hitter, 8-0, to end the Angels' fantastic 1979 season. "But," said Fregosi, "this was only the beginning. We can hardly wait for the next season to begin."